

When Your Boat Springs a Leak...

One of the best things you can have around is a life jacket. No one knows that lesson better than two Sailors, ages 28 and 36, whose recreational boat sank one Saturday in October. They spent the night bobbing in the ocean, drifting miles apart from each other.

Rescue came the next day when the crew of a Coast Guard helicopter plucked the younger Sailor from the water, and a boater picked up the older man. Both victims were exhausted and, according to a Coast Guard spokeswoman, probably wouldn't have survived "had they not had life jackets on. They were treading water the whole time," she said.

Coast Guard statistics released in early-December 2004, showed that 86 percent of all boaters who drowned in 2003 weren't wearing life jackets. Alcohol also was a contributing factor in about one-third of all reported boating fatalities.

More than 95 percent of boat owners report having enough life jackets on board for all their passengers. As revealed in a 2001 and 2002 Coast Guard study of more than 25,000 recreational boaters, however, 66 percent of the passengers don't wear their life jackets every time they go out.

"Boaters need to be responsible for the safety of themselves, their passengers, and other boaters," stressed RAdm. J. W. Underwood, Coast Guard director for operations policy. "This means not only having life jackets on board but requiring your passengers to wear them all the time. You never know when an accident will happen that will prevent you from reaching for and putting on that life jacket."

The statistics also show the leading contributing factors in boating accidents are operator inattention, carelessness and inexperience, as well as excessive speed. Eighty percent of those who died in 2003 were on board boats whose operators had not received boating-safety instruction.

"There still are far too many deaths, injuries and accidents," continued RAdm. Underwood. "The key is education, which is why the Coast Guard's Office of Boating Safety has joined forces with a number of recreational boating-safety partners to launch our 'You're in Command. Be Responsible. Boat Safely!' initiative."

Coast Guard photo by PA3 Mike Hvozda



A Coast Guard PO3 inspects life jackets during a recreational boating-safety boarding in New York Harbor.

Recreational boating fatalities in 2003 were down six percent from the previous year, continuing a 12-year downward trend. The 13 million registered boats in 2003 represent two million more craft on America's waterways than 12 years ago.

The new statistics are posted on the Coast Guard's Office of Boating Safety website at www.uscgboating.org and include statistics broken down by state. For more information, boaters can visit www.vesselsafetycheck.org or call the Coast Guard infoline at 1-800-368-5647. ■